

Civil War Book Review

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Article 3

The Three-Cornered War: the Union, the Confederacy, and Native Peoples in the Fight for the West

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Review

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Nelson, Megan Kate. *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, The Confederacy, and the Native Peoples in the Fight for the West*. Scribner, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$20.99 ISBN 9781501152542 pp. 368

In the early 1860s, far from the American Civil War's traditional Eastern and even "Western" theaters, New Mexico Territory quickly became an American, Confederate, Diné, and Apache battleground for control of the region. Despite its strategic value to all parties and the blood spilt to win it, the Southwest has remained a geographically and intellectually distant frontier in most historians' conceptions of the war. Pushing back against the region's neglected status in her latest book, *The Three-Cornered War: The Union, The Confederacy, and the Native Peoples in the Fight for the West*, Megan Kate Nelson effectively brings the Far West front and center to the ambitions, military objectives and engagements, and long term consequences of the Civil War.

The Three-Cornered War is a history of the multi-sided warfare that took place in New Mexico Territory, land that today makes up Arizona and New Mexico, throughout the 1860s. While often told as a North-South story, the Civil War was a fully continental conflict in which western territory mattered greatly before, during, and after. At stake was no less than the life or death of nations. With the Confederacy looking to build an empire of slavery and acquire western gold and deep-water ports, "the Lincoln administration had to retain control of the West in order to win the war" (xiv). Meanwhile, the Navajo and Chiricahua Apache presented "a serious challenge to the Union Army's campaign to gain control of New Mexico at the beginning of the American Civil War" (xvii). Providing readers with a history of the conflict between federal and Confederate forces in the first two years of the Civil War, the book gives equal weight and importance to the Union's fraught relationship with and warfare against Native peoples to control the region well after the death of the Confederate imperial project after mid-1862.

Nelson, a trained historian and now full-time writer, uses a multi-perspective narrative to tell this story from the experiences of nine individuals: “Mangas Coloradas, the Apache Chief; [John A.] Clark, the surveyor general; [Louisa] Canby, the Army wife; [Christopher “Kit”] Carson, the famous frontiersman; Juanita; the Navajo weaver; [Alonzo] Ickis, the gold miner; [James Henry] Carleton, the Union colonel; [John Robert] Baylor, the ambitious rancher; and [William Lott] Davidson, the young lawyer” (252). Through her wide-ranging cast of historical actors, Nelson gives voice to diverse perspectives from the archives, some which have been rarely included in histories of the Civil War thus far. Featuring military and non-combatant men and women, Unionists, Confederates, and Native leaders, *The Three-Cornered War* is a uniquely human-centered military and political history that reveals “how the imagined future of the West shaped the Civil War, and how the Civil War became a defining moment in the West” (252). A new kind of Civil War history, the book also features Nelson’s interdisciplinary talents in environmental and cultural history, honed writing her two previously well-received books: *Trembling Earth: A Cultural History of the Okefenokee Swamp* (2009) and *Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War* (2012).

While its strong multi-character narrative leads to more subtle arguments and historiographical explanation than are common in books of similar research caliber, *The Three-Cornered War* is a successful and highly readable addition to Civil War scholarship that reflects a number of recent turns in the field. Nelson powerfully establishes the centrality of the Southwest to antebellum, wartime, and postwar political priorities at the national level, drawing from and contributing to the growing scholarship on Confederate dreams of empire. *The Three-Cornered War* is also clearly influenced by insights of Elliott West and like-minded historians emphasizing the links between developments in southern and western mid-nineteenth century U.S. history. As Nelson puts it, “these struggles for power in the West exposed a hard and complicated truth about the Union government’s war aims: that they simultaneously embraced slave emancipation and Native extermination in order to secure an American empire of liberty” (202). This argument certainly won’t be new to western historians, but Nelson will likely be introducing her more popular audience to this connection for the first time.

Nelson does depart from West’s “Greater Reconstruction” framework with her emphasis on the Civil War as a critical turning point in the development of the West, one of the central claims of the book. Traditionally, the Civil War has not featured prominently in scholars’ Native

and western histories which emphasize the continuity of growing American imperialism over the course of the nineteenth century. But Nelson's argument for the importance of the Civil War to the history of the region is strongly established by both her sources and narrative style. Through the interwoven narrative of federal, Confederate, and Native protagonists, the Civil War becomes Indian War and Indian War becomes the Civil War. Nelson's deconstruction of the strict division between Indian War and the Civil War in New Mexico Territory narratively and argumentatively is one of her most exciting and important contributions. Offering an important correction to the long tradition of writing nineteenth century U.S. and Native history separately, *The Three-Cornered War* is an original addition into a growing body of literature excavating the relationships between the Civil War and concurrent wars against Native peoples in Indian Territory, Minnesota (The Dakota War of 1862), Colorado (Sand Creek), and elsewhere in the continental U.S.

Of all Nelson's arguments, the claim that "New Mexico became a *pivotal* theater of the Civil War, the center of a larger struggle for the future of the nation, of Native peoples, and of the West" (xx) is the one that could use a stronger defense. This is especially true if Nelson wishes to take on the very active rejection of the war's far western reach by traditional military historians. While *The Three-Cornered War* will probably not change the mind of traditionalists like Gary Gallagher, Nelson successfully returns some much needed contingency to the writing of the early years of the Civil War and has positioned the book perfectly to popularize and democratize the ways historians are thinking about southern and western history together in recent years. In addition to its significant argumentative contributions, the book's narrative style is a welcome example of the payoff of creative approaches to writing history and should become a classroom staple both in terms of its content and craft.

Bringing new scholarship on the Civil War and the West to a much wider readership, *The Three-Cornered War* is a book that marries high-quality research with accessible writing for both academic and popular audiences alike.

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